



Town of Groton, Connecticut

Meeting Minutes

Town Council

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Town Clerk 860-441-6640
Town Manager
860-441-6630

Mayor Heather Bond Somers, Councilors Dean G. Antipas, Bruce S. Flax, Bill Johnson, Karen F. Morton, Deborah L. Peruzzotti, Rita M. Schmidt, James L. Streeter, and Harry A. Watson

Thursday, March 28, 2013

7:00 PM

Groton Senior Center, Route 117

FYE 2014 BUDGET PUBLIC HEARING SPECIAL MEETING

I. ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order at 7:02 p.m. by Mayor Somers.

Members Present: Mayor Somers, Councilor Antipas, Councilor Flax, Councilor Johnson, Councilor Morton, Councilor Peruzzotti, Councilor Schmidt, Councilor Streeter and Councilor Watson

Also present were Town Manager Mark Oefinger, Interim Superintendent of Schools John Ramos, City Mayor Marian Galbraith, Board of Education Chairman Kirsten Hoyt, RTM Moderator Jean-Claude Ambroise, Board of Education members, City Councilors, RTM members, Town staff, Town Clerk Betsy Moukawsher and Office Assistant Lori Watrous.

II. SALUTE TO THE FLAG

The Salute to the Flag was led by Rob Zuliani.

III. INTRODUCTION OF ELECTED OFFICIALS

Elected officials introduced themselves at the request of Mayor Somers.

IV. READING OF PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE

The Notice of Public Hearing pursuant to a resolution passed by the Town Council was read by Town Clerk Betsy Moukawsher.

V. BUDGET PRESENTATIONS

a. Town Manager

Town Manager Mark Oefinger gave a brief summary of the proposed FYE 2014 budget. The proposed budget is \$121,627,763 which represents a .6% increase over the current year. He explained that there are six parts which make up the budget and he summarized the proposed changes in each of those areas. He reviewed where Groton stands when compared to the other 168 communities throughout Connecticut regarding debt per capita; education expenditure per pupil; tax levy per capita; property tax revenue as a percentage of total revenue; equalized mil rates; and the makeup of the tax base between industry, residential, and commercial. The Town Manager remarked that the RTM has requested a list of potential cuts to reach a zero mil rate increase. This would mean decreasing the proposed budget by \$4 million. Mr. Oefinger is not recommending any of the items, but will prepare a list in response to the RTM request.

b. Superintendent of Schools

Interim Superintendent John Ramos stated that he presented two budgets to the Board of Education (BOE): one that would keep services the same as the current year, and the other which shows a zero percent increase and outlines potential consequences of no increase in funding. The cost to continue providing the same services as the current budget would be an increase of 5.5%. Potential cuts to achieve a zero percent increase were listed and categorized as too drastic, reluctantly possible, and items requiring further discussion. After much deliberation, the budget forwarded to the Town Council represents a 1.4% increase, which will result in reductions in staff and services. Dr. Ramos further stated that even with a 1.4% increase, over 80 positions will be cut.

VI. OPENING OF PUBLIC HEARING

Mayor Somers called the FYE 2014 Budget Public Hearing to order at 7:49 p.m.

Kathleen Stauffer, 339 Heather Glen Lane, Mystic, Chief Executive Officer of ARC New London County, stated that ARC is a full-service agency providing critical support for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. ARC focuses on young adult and adult services, with weekend and social choice programming. She urged the Council to approve its budget request.

Christine Cabral, 66 Latham Street, stated that the interdistrict magnet school transportation costs are fully reimbursable by an active State grant. Through FOI requests, Ms. Cabral found out that the grant money is received in two installments, which are received by the Town and then rolled into an education account for transportation grants. She urged the Council to reject a budget that does not include interdistrict transportation.

Nancy Coleman, 133 Buckeye Road, remarked that with two jobs and a husband in the Navy, she will be unable to transport her child to the magnet school if the interdistrict transportation funding is cut. She stated that this cut would needlessly punish Groton students who attend the magnet school. Ms. Coleman urged the Council not to approve a budget that does not reinstate this funding.

Leslie Spees, 188 Prospect Hill Road, Noank, an all-day Kindergarten teacher, stated that her objective in the classroom is to keep children safe and help them to reach their potential. Many Kindergartners are only four years old at the beginning of the school year and two adults are needed for safety and learning. Paraprofessionals cost very little compared to their value and Ms. Spees thinks that they are needed in the classroom all day, not just part of the day.

Bill Jervis, 75 Shennecossett Parkway, encouraged the Council to approve the City's budget request without any further reductions.

Larry Gerrish, 5 Round Hill Road, a City Councilor, noted that the budget request from the City has decreased even though costs have increased. He believes this is due to good management. He urged the Council to approve the City budget.

Lisa Tess, 84 Ensign Drive, Mystic, urged the Council not to make further cuts to the education budget. She feels that interdistrict busing should be put back into the budget. Ms. Tess noted that before someone relocates, they always check the school system in the Town they are considering.

Kevin Trejo, 536 Shennecossett Road, stated that the Fleet Fund should not be cut further. He noted that debt service has already been lowered, and it will be difficult to find anything to cut in the Town Manager's budget. He agrees with a 1.4% increase in the education budget; however, there need to be checks and balances on Central Office, as the money has not been spent wisely. He encouraged the Council to be fair.

Larry Croxton, 35 Knoll Drive, a teacher at Fitch Senior High School, feels that Groton has a great school system. He asked that the Council not make any further cuts to the BOE budget, since even with the \$1.4 million increase, there are already many things that will be cut.

Rosanne Kotowski, 24 Ann Avenue, Mystic, an RTM member, hopes that the Council and RTM pass a budget with no increase in taxes. She stated that the BOE budget could be reduced to the minimum budget requirement. She noted that there is \$1 million for raises and \$1 million in additional benefit costs in the proposed budget. Ms. Kotowski remarked that teacher salaries in Groton are \$5,000-\$10,000 higher than in similar towns; administrators, central office, and teacher salaries need to be realigned; numerous class sizes are under nine students; and student enrollment is down. On the Town side, Ms. Kotowski stated that no taxpayer dollars should be

spent on the golf course; salaries for union and non-union should be scaled back; and non-union post employment benefits should be reduced. She hopes that the final budget will not raise taxes.

Sherry Cutler, 115 Irving Street, Mystic, is employed as an elementary school paraprofessional. She has been yelled at, sworn at, kicked, hit, and bitten. She has assisted children in toilet training, provided countless hugs, and loves her job. Ms. Cutler makes \$10.69 per hour as a paraprofessional. She noted that if the Board of Education cuts 151 paraprofessional positions, the students' lifeline to success may be taken away.

Mary Ann Little, 22 Pearl Street, Noank, requested full support for the education budget. She noted that 80 positions will be eliminated already and that funding is needed to properly educate students. Education is evolving, support services are required, and students need to be prepared for college, job expectations, and life.

Alan Nordquist, 42 Somerset Drive, Mystic, stated that he is in favor of additional sports fields, an aquatics center (especially a warm water therapy pool), and more basketball courts. Mr. Nordquist also supports the Judson Avenue drainage project and would like to see it go to referendum, as basement water problems in that area continue to get worse.

Deborah Johnson, 196 Flanders Road, Mystic, supports the \$1.4 million increase in the BOE budget. She noted that even with this increase, 80 staff members will be cut, and there will be cuts to programs and services. Ms. Johnson stated that the BOE cannot sustain a fourth year with no increase.

Kheeyshia Steele, 42 Mather Avenue, has a child who uses interdistrict magnet school transportation. The impact on her family will be devastating if transportation is cut, as Ms. Steele would be forced to either find a job with hours that would allow her to transport her child or to withdraw her child from the magnet school. Ms. Steele asked the Council not to punish the students who use this transportation and to reject any budget that does not include these transportation costs.

Julie Maisch, 60 Colony Road, requested Groton's continued support for the Eastern Connecticut Symphony Orchestra. She stated that Groton students are able to handle instruments through the Music in the Schools program. Residents also can attend concerts and participate in the youth orchestra and chorus. Ms. Maisch remarked that the symphony is a true cultural asset for the community.

George Finch, 100 Allen Street, is concerned that the Town is paying for lights and heat at schools which have been closed (Groton Heights School, Noank School, William Seely School, and the Fitch Middle School). If nothing is going to be done with the buildings, they should be leveled. If programs need to be cut, they should be cut. He would like Police Departments to be consolidated. Mr. Finch remarked that every time he sees a routine traffic stop, there are three police cars at the scene, which is a waste of taxpayer dollars. At Charles Barnum School, the tile can be covered with material similar to the material that Walmart used. It has a 30-year guarantee and won't cost the Town \$440,000.

Marian Galbraith, 771 Shennecossett Road, remarked that the City has worked diligently to trim costs, stating that the City highway and police budget request is down 2%. Mayor Galbraith clarified that the City submits a budget request in order to provide the services that the Town already provides to other residents.

Connie Readett, 10 New London Road, works with special education in Waterford. She does not agree with cutting paraprofessionals or the strings program. She noted that programs like the strings program can be life changing.

Lorraine Scheetz, 52 Fleming Court, stated that the Mayor and her staff have worked diligently on the City budget request, and asked the Council to approve it.

Bruce Lowe, 60 Hyde Pond Court, a City police officer, agrees with Ms. Scheetz and noted that the police budget is lean. Mr. Lowe stated that police officers are dedicated, serve in schools, and volunteer in the community.

Bobby Harris, 191 Virgo Drive, a City police officer, feels that Groton has some of the best police officers in the country and urged the Council to support the City budget request.

William Kelly, 61 Latham Street, reminded Councilors of their responsibility. He would like the Council to think about any impacts to future generations when considering the budget.

Lesley Aument, 127 Rogers Road, stated that it is time to run Groton like a business. There are three police departments, two dispatch centers, and two public works departments. The Town, the City and the Navy all have Parks and Recreation Departments. Property taxes continue to rise and she believes that we have to do whatever it takes to make Groton a better place to live.

Rita Mangelinkx, 82 Stoneheights Drive, Waterford, is a preschool teacher in Groton. She stated that about half of her students have special needs and it is necessary to have appropriate staffing levels as these students are more impulsive. Ms. Mangelinkx does not think that the paraprofessionals should be cut.

Juliette Parker, 520F Shennecossett Road, is a single parent who would be affected if the interdistrict magnet school transportation is cut. She thinks that the grant should be utilized and this transportation should remain in the budget. Ms. Parker supports the City budget and the strings program.

Michael Kane, 51 Jupiter Point Road, has a daughter who attends the magnet school and will be affected by the interdistrict magnet school transportation cut. He stated that the transportation costs are fully reimbursable and that cutting these funds will not reduce taxes.

Lili Kane, 51 Jupiter Point Road, stated that she takes the interdistrict magnet school bus every day and her parents don't know what to do if it is cut. She urged Councilors to put it back in the budget.

Syma Ebbin, 51 Jupiter Point Road, urged the BOE to reinstate the funds for interdistrict magnet school transportation. She stated that it is revenue neutral and should not be cut. She remarked that if there is a need to cut a bus in Town, it should be the bus that takes senior citizens to Shop Rite in New London and Walmart in Waterford, which are not even Groton businesses. Ms. Ebbin disagrees with cutting paraprofessionals.

Scott Aument, 127 Rogers Road, an RTM member, noted that revenues and government grants are projected to go down. The Town cannot sustain its tax rate increases. Mr. Aument believes that cost savings could be achieved by cutting the underutilized IB program; cutting central office staff; combining EMS dispatch centers; and putting pressure on the City to fund more of its own needs.

Deb Jenkins, 41 Burgess Place, an educator at Fitch Senior High School, supports both the City budget and the BOE budget. She believes that it would be a disservice to students to cut the BOE budget any further.

Deb Patrick, 8 Mellow Avenue, supports the City budget and urged Councilors to approve it as

presented. She noted that the City budget request does reflect a decrease.

Brett Terry, 10 Conrad Street, supports the education budget and the strings program. He stated that strings take a lot of work, there is no immediate gratification, and it is good to expose children to music.

Wayne Chiapperini, 150 Library Street, stated that anything extra has been removed from the budget over the last five years. He supports an aquatic center and the sports field study. Mr. Chiapperini stated that we need a Town center and the vacant Fitch Middle School is a possibility. The building has classrooms, an auditorium, and enough room for an aquatics center.

Keith Hedrick, 156 Shennecossett Parkway, a City Councilor and RTM member, stated that Groton is a great place to live. He supports the City budget and encouraged Councilors to be careful not to make cuts that cripple departments. Mr. Hedrick remarked that Groton needs to encourage new businesses.

Shannon Stevenson, 14 Danika Way, Griswold, is a music teacher in Groton who is concerned about the potential negative impact of cutting the strings program. She noted that it is critical to start early and asked for the strings program to be increased.

June Evered, 86 Buddington Road, a Parks and Recreation Commissioner, requested that Councilors approve the study for more playing fields, stating that Poquonnock Plains is heavily used and that coaches should be supported.

Beth Horler, 14 Ferry View Drive, Gales Ferry, President of the Groton Education Association, urged the Council to pass the BOE budget as it is presented. She noted that it is not realistic to continually have no increase in the budget.

John Casey, 65 Pequot Avenue, Vice-President of the Board of Trustees of the Mystic & Noank Library, stated that the library's request is an attempt to get back to previous funding levels. He noted that the library circulates books and magazines, provides meeting rooms, and is a community asset. Mr. Casey urged the Council to approve the library's budget request.

Lea Graner Kennedy, 152 Cedar Road, a teacher, stated that the BOE cannot sustain another zero dollar increase, and that 50-60 paraprofessionals will already be cut out of the proposed budget. Ms. Kennedy is in favor of passing the education budget as proposed.

Tina McLaughlin, 15 Cove Road, is concerned about education and safety in the schools with the proposed reduction of paraprofessionals. She is in support of the education budget.

Leslie Seifert, 6 Walter Fish Avenue, a teacher at Fitch Senior High School, stated that cutting programs in the schools is a travesty and we do a disservice to the Town and community when we cut them.

Nikki Lynick, 131 Dewey Avenue, has a daughter at the magnet school and if transportation is cut, her daughter would no longer be able to attend. Ms. Lynick stated that the costs for interdistrict buses are fully reimbursed by a grant and she hopes that this item will be put back into the budget.

Lynn McCormick, 43 Williams Street, Noank, thinks that the proposed cuts to paraprofessionals should be reconsidered and that the loss of third grade strings will be detrimental to the community. She urged the Council to send the education budget back to the BOE for reconsideration.

Genevieve Cerf, 17 Crescent Street, an RTM member, is concerned that the increases in taxes are

unsustainable. She would like the strings program put back in; the baccalaureate program taken out; the City budget reduced; every Town department reduced by 10%; and the number of police officers reduced.

Wanda (Beth) E. Tillman, 925 River Road, noted that the Eastern Connecticut Symphony Orchestra goes into the schools, has a young peoples concert, and needs the region's support to survive. The symphony is mainly supported by grants, but would appreciate Council support for its budget request.

Marie Sultana Robinson, 261 Lamphere Road, supports the Mystic & Noank Library budget request. She stated that she utilizes the computers, takes out books and movies, and even does her banking there. Ms. Robinson considers the library a vital resource. She also noted that she feels safe in Town due to the Police Department.

Mike Doyle, 15 Elm Street, supports the budget as presented. He noted that we need to maintain and improve the Town to encourage new businesses. Mr. Doyle supports the playing field study and an aquatics center.

Valerie Riley, 6 Bolles Lane, Mystic, supports the BOE budget and stated that there are more than enough cuts already. She asked Councilors to approve the \$1.4 million increase.

Ivy Williams, 14 Maxson Road, an RTM member and a retired teacher, stated that the students will suffer without the paraprofessionals. She believes that it is a mistake to cut them. Ms. Williams also supports the strings program.

Jon Heller, 19 Packer Lane, Mystic, agreed that there are some inefficiencies. He noted that the grand list needs to go up and mil rates need to go down, but he is willing to pay a bit more in taxes to get an increased value for his home. Mr. Heller supports the education budget and would like to see some of the cuts reinstated.

Adrian Howe, 6 Forest Drive, Mystic, has two children that have participated in the baccalaureate program. He believes that it helps students to achieve academic excellence. He hopes that this unique program remains in the budget and is viewed as necessary.

Stephanie Jasenak, 81 Hemlock Road, an orchestra teacher in Groton, noted that skills learned through the strings program will be remembered long after.

Tina McLaughlin, 702 Cow Hill Road, Mystic, a paraprofessional, feels that paraprofessionals and volunteers are needed in the classroom. She invited Councilors to come to the school for a day to see exactly what a paraprofessional does. She stated that teachers will be overwhelmed without their assistance.

Jessica Donnel, 12 Elderkin Avenue, has a special education student that has a full-time paraprofessional in his classroom and a one-on-one paraprofessional for himself one hour a day. With the proposed cuts he will lose most of that. Ms. Donnel realizes that cuts must be made, but asked if they could be made somewhere other than paraprofessionals.

Jean-Claude Ambroise, 169 Shennecossett Parkway, Moderator of the RTM, supports the proposed \$1.4 million increase in the BOE budget. He noted that half of the increase (\$660,000) is for redistricting which is an unfunded mandate. He supports the City budget. He remarked that something similar to the roads ordinance could be developed that would go to referendum to appropriate money for other CIPs. Mr. Ambroise stated that 90% of the budget is personnel and he would like to see shared sacrifice. He would rather have increases to the 'eye level' employees than non-union employees.

The Mayor stated that the Town Council budget sessions will be televised and that citizens can contact the Town Clerk's office for a schedule.

Mayor Somers declared the public hearing closed at 10:23 p.m.

VII. ADJOURNMENT

By consensus, the meeting adjourned at 10:24 p.m.

Attest:

*Betsy Moukawsher, Town Clerk
Clerk of the Council*

Lori Watrous, Office Assistant